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3

ARTICLE APPEARED ON PAGE 1-D

WASHINGTON TIMES
11 March 1985

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Surging Soviet sea power

Taking stock of their extraordinary Pacific buildup

An updated balance sheet of Soviet naval forces in the Pacific Ocean reveals an extraordinary leap over the past 15 years in Soviet preparedness and sea power, to a degree little realized even by informed Western public opinion.

To put it bluntly, Soviet sea power now threatens every country on the Pacific Rim and all sea lines of communication. And unlike the Atlantic and the Mediterranean, where besides the United States there are other naval powers, the British and the French, to confront the Soviet Atlantic fleet, there is no naval power in the Pacific except the United States.

Highlighted on the map below are some of the statistics from the balance sheet prepared by U.S. Navy sources and made available by the office of Seth Cropsey, the deputy undersecretary of the Navy for policy.

This is only part of the Soviet Navy story. But first some historical and geopolitical background.

With the fall of Saigon and the reunification of Vietnam under Communist direction there followed a few years later, in 1978, Soviet-Vietnamese friendship treaty and Soviet increases in military and economic aid. In January 1979, Vietnam invaded Kampuchea.

The same year Vietnam assured the United Nations that Cam Ranh Bay, once the mighty Danang fortification under U.S. control during the Vietnam War, would not become a Soviet base. Even further, Leonid Brezhnev assured President Carter during the SALT talks in Vienna that the U.S.S.R. would not establish military bases in Vietnam.

Between April and June 1979, the Soviets opened an electronic intelligence-gathering station at Cam Ranh Bay and U.S. reconnaissance satellites "imaged," or photographed a Soviet "Foxtrot-type" submarine in port and TU-95 reconnaissance aircraft at Danang.

By 1980, Soviet ships stationed at Cam Ranh Bay had increased to seven, while routine visits by other Soviet Navy units increased. During the same year, four TU-95 electronic reconnaissance aircraft, two TU-25s, and BE-12 anti-submarine aircraft were now stationed at Cam Ranh Bay and Danang.

A year later, in 1981, Soviet ships stationed at Cam Ranh Bay had increased to 10, while runways were strengthened to handle larger planes. Five floating repair ship supply piers were "imaged" at Cam Ranh Bay.

In March 1982, the 40,000-ton carrier Minsk entered the Gulf of Siam. The new Kiev-class aircraft carrier, **Novorossiysk,** is now on permanent deployment in the Pacific. By 1982, reports indicated that more than 300 Soviet naval vessels, which routinely moved in and out of the region, used Cam Ranh Bay port facilities.

In 1983, the U.S.S.R. launched worldwide what are called "Command and Control" (C-2) exercises in which units stationed at Cam Ranh Bay and Danang participated.

A year later, in April 1984, the U.S.S.R. launched a series of simultaneous independent worldwide fleet exercises. Soviet Pacific fleet units conducted local theater operations designed to assess capabilities in crisis mobilization, anti-submarine warfare, control and command, and fleet ability to break out into the open sea. Later that year, in December, Soviet MIG-23s were "imaged" for the first time at Cam Ranh Bay.

So much for the assurances given President Carter that the U.S.S.R. wouldn't turn Cam Ranh Bay and Danang into military bases.

Since the war's end, Soviet naval forces have increased sharply; in 1965, the Pacific Fleet accounted for 25 percent of all Soviet naval assets; in 1975, 28 percent; and today, at

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least 32 percent. The Soviet Northern Fleet, which operates out of Archangel, has increased its surface and submarine assets by 20 percent since 1965. In 1975, the U.S.S.R. began modernizing its Pacific Fleet air wings to a far greater degree than similar modernization programs for the Northern, Baltic, or Black Sea Fleets.

What does all this mean for the Free World?

- Cam Ranh Bay sits astride the sea lanes of communication which connect the Pacific and Indian Oceans as well as the same SLOCs which link the nations of these areas to the West.
- Approximately 2,500 Soviet military advisers are assigned to Vietnam.
- The People's Republic of China claims that Cam Ranh Bay facilities are completely operated by the U.S.S.R., while all Vietnamese are excluded from the area itself. In other words, Cam Ranh Bay is now a Soviet territorial possession.

Vietnam, it seems, has exchanged its one-time French colonial masters for Soviet colonial masters.

- Some 20 Soviet ships and six nuclear attack and cruise-missile submarines operate daily in the area. These numbers represent an increase of 25 percent since 1982.
- Reconnaissance aircraft — Bear Ds — and anti-submarine Bear Fs operate routinely from Vietnamese airfields.
- Since 1983, TU-16 Badgers in strike, tanker, and electronic configurations have been operating out of Vietnam. Flogger bomber-fighters routinely operate from Vietnam.

All these preparations demonstrate an extraordinary financial investment by the U.S.S.R. in the Pacific, so that at present there is little competition from anybody except the United States to prevent the U.S.S.R. from turning the Pacific into a Soviet *mare nostrum*. (The Soviet investment in Vietnam is estimated to be anywhere from $3-5 million a day, with a $3 billion total investment since 1979.)

Fortunately, the governments of the Pacific area, for the most part, are hostile to the U.S.S.R., including, of course, the People's Republic of China. Japan, in particular, is apprehensive of the Soviet intentions. Its airspace has been violated by Soviet planes 16 times since 1967. In March 1982, Soviet KGB operatives, charged with spying, were expelled from Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore.

The net assessment of the Pacific "correlation of forces" is that if Japan, a far weaker foe in 1941, was able to mount so powerful an attack during World War II against the United States and Britain, an attack which took some four years to crush, the U.S.S.R. is far better prepared, overwhelmingly so, to use its military presence and force-in-being to pressure the ASEAN nations in a pro-Soviet direction. This is especially true because the U.S.S.R. now enjoys an even closer relationship with North Korea and India than ever before.

These Soviet dispositions in the Pacific should be carefully examined by our new Geneva negotiating team as it prepares to meet the Soviet delegation, especially now that the ANZUS (Australia, New Zealand, and the United States) Treaty seems to be crumbling into utter ineffectiveness.

The Soviet failure to keep its word not to fortify Vietnam should not be forgotten, either.

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